

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

THE BLOOMINGTON CONVENTION OF 1856 AND THOSE WHO PARTICIPATED IN IT.

(By J. O. Cunningham.)

No meeting of the people of the State of Illinois was ever held which effected greater results to the State, the Nation and to those who participated in its deliberations, than did that which assembled at Major's Hall in the City of Bloomington, on the 29th day of May, 1856.

If any excuse is due for an attempt to introduce here matters which then partook of the severest partisanship of the day, it should be found in the fact that the partisanship and partisan contests of 1856 have long since passed into the history of the State and the Nation, and so, in a manner, have lost their offensive character. Especially is this true when we consider that of those who participated there and in the political campaign which it initiated, very few remain in life.

Topics relating to the institution of American Slavery had been but little discussed in most parts of the State of Illinois after being laid to rest in 1824, until the introduction, by Senator Douglas in 1854, of the bill for the organization of the territories of Kansas and Nebraska. Up to that date no ballot had ever been cast in perhaps a majority of the counties of the State for the candidates of the "Liberty" or "Free Soil" party, and such as had been cast, not exceeding 6 per cent of the entire vote of the State, were in the northern counties; so that slavery agitation before the latter date, had prevailed only within a few of the counties.

The introduction and passage through Congress of that measure, which in fact changed a Congressional prohibition of slavery in the territories north of the parallel of 36 degrees and 30 minutes into a local option for such territory, had the effect, all over the north and especially within the State of Illinois, one of whose senators in the Congress stood as sponsor for the new plan of settling the slavery question, to arouse violent agitation.

Many of Senator Douglas' friends in Illinois, who had never been suspected of entertaining sentiments unfriendly to the holding of men in slavery, but who had always regarded the legislation of 1820 as a finality as to the question of slavery in the territory affected by its terms, were aroused to a fierce opposition, and were well backed and

encouraged in their opposition by the Whigs who were not committed to the support of slavery, as well as by the Free Soil element of the northern part of the State.

The segregation of these elements at the election in November, 1854, brought about by a common impulse rather than by the usual party organization, effected through State conventions, resulted, for the first time in the history of the State, in the choice of a General Assembly made up of elements adverse to the party of Senator Douglas, as well as of a majority of the representatives of the State in Congress, of like proclivities.

The legislature so chosen elected to the United States Senate to succeed James Shields, a political friend of Judge Douglas, Lyman Trumbull, an opponent, which was the first instance during the thirty-seven years of the history of Illinois, as a State, of an election to that high office of a candidate from a party or faction openly opposed to the then ruling party.

The few weeks which preceded this remarkable election witnessed an experience in the politics of Illinois entirely new to the State. The slavery question, as connected with the choice of officers of the State, became for the first time a topic of general discussion upon the stump and elsewhere.

Lyman Trumbull, John M. Palmer, John Wentworth, N. B. Judd, Burton C. Cook, Isaac N. Arnold, Gustavus Koerner and other of Senator Douglas' political friends, took issue with him upon the wisdom and policy of the Kansas-Nebraska legislation and at once broke with their party upon that issue; while Abraham Lincoln, O. H. Browning, Joseph Gillespie, Richard Yates, Leonard Swett, Jesse O. Norton, James C. Conkling, and many other old line Whigs who, by the death of their party, were a strong force without a party organization, joined them in their opposition to the policy of Senator Douglas. The discussion of that policy in connection with a pending election of members of Congress could lead nowhere else than to a general discussion of the slavery question, whether they wished it or not. This it did, necessarily and almost involuntarily. So, in the autumn of 1854, the politicians found themselves talking about slavery upon the stump.

Mr. Lincoln, of whom it may be said that until that year he had grown up in the shade of Judge Douglas' great reputation, it would seem now saw his opportunity and entered into the contest in advocacy of the election of candidates opposed to him. He spoke at Chicago, Peoria, Springfield, Urbana, and probably at other places.

The writer listened to the Urbana speech, delivered in the court house on Oct. 24, 1854, during court week, to an audience made up mostly of men who had never in their lives heard the rightfulness of slavery questioned in a public address. The caution and delicacy with which the slavery question was handled by the speaker caused no little surprise to one listener, whose political views had been shaped largely by listening, in another state, to Parker Pillsbury, Abbie Kelley, S. S. Foster and Joshua R. Giddings. Mr. Lincoln well knew his audience and the horror in which the epithet, "Abolitionist," was held by them, and so carefully avoided running afoul of that dilemma.

The policy of the admission of slavery into the territory north of the prohibited line, and not the moral wrong of slavery, was argued by him; meantime the fugitive slave law of 1850 was upheld.

As before said, in spite of the appeals of Douglas and the offensive use made by him of the favorite epithet, "Abolitionist," with the prefix of "black," added, his party lost in this preliminary contest. This much by way of explanation of the causes which led up to the convention which forms the subject of this paper.

Chief among the causes which contributed to the concentration of an unorganized anti-slavery sentiment in the State in favor of candidates opposed to the policy of Senator Douglas, was the press of the State. In Chicago every newspaper, both Whig and Democratic, made war upon the senator, and the Whig newspapers of the State, with few exceptions, joined in the opposition. It was this influence that kept the opposition alive and finally crystalized it in Illinois, into a definite, live, winning party. It was then known as the "Anti-Nebraska" press and party.

Upon the initiative suggestion of the Journal, published at Jacksonville, and edited by our venerable co-laborer, Paul Selby, seconded by twenty-four other newspapers of the State, a meeting of newspaper men having in view organization, was held at Decatur, Feb. 22, 1856. Twelve newspaper men answered the call and were organized under the leadership of Mr. Selby. Mr. Lincoln, naturally feeling an interest in the movement, and perhaps others, joined in the consultation. The result was a moderate declaration of principles held by the meeting upon the political topics uppermost in the public mind and the appointment of a provisional committee charged with the duty of calling a convention to meet at Bloomington on the 29th day of May, 1856; to fix the ratio of representation for the convention and to take such steps as may seem desirable to bring about a full representation from the whole State. This committee well performed its duty and published its call in apt time.

It will be seen that according to the code of political ethics understood to govern political movements, this convention lacked in that it was not legally called by a general committee representing a recognized, existing political party, for there was no Republican party in Illinois. It however held a higher claim to regularity, in that it did represent the people who opposed the further extension of African slavery, then an unorganized mass of independent Democrats, Whigs, and Liberty men, acting together and bound by a common sympathy.

Up to that date the term "Republican," as the name of a political party had been made use of in other states and in a few localities in this State, as a party designation; but with the use made of it by Senator Douglas in connection with the prefix "Black," and the hated epithet "Abolitionist," it carried with it much that was obnoxious to the people of a considerable part of the State. So the call for the convention made no use of this name, but on the contrary called for a "State Convention of the Anti-Nebraska Party of Illinois." At that time this name had a definite meaning and all understood that all shades of opposition to Senator Douglas new policy were intended and invited by the call.

Singularly enough, the names of the nominees of that convention for the office of Governor and for Lieutenant Governor were well settled and agreed upon and most enthusiastically announced by public opinion, as declared through friendly newspapers, before the date fixed for it to assemble. One voice went up in favor of Col. William H. Bissell, a veteran of the Mexican war, for Governor and for Francis A. Hoffman, a popular German citizen of Chicago, for Lieutenant Governor. So far as candidates for these offices were concerned, the convention had but to record and announce the verdict of its constituency.


I now come to speak of my own personal observations in connection with the convention.

Mr. Lincoln, who according to all accounts, figured so largely, both in the calling and in the conducting of the meeting, the week before the date fixed, had been in attendance upon the Champaign county circuit court, and during convention week, was at the Vermilion court; at both places using his influence to bring together a good representation of the people in sympathy with its purposes. Citizens of both counties on the day before the convention, with Mr. Lincoln, came west to Decatur upon the same Wabash train, on their way to Bloomington. We arrived at Decatur about the middle of the afternoon, where, on account of there being no train for Bloomington that evening, all remained for the night. A considerable portion of the day remained before us and the company kept well together, strolling around the town, and finally, at the suggestion of Mr. Lincoln, all went to the then near-by Sangamon timber. Here, seated upon a fallen tree, Mr. Lincoln talked freely as he had during the afternoon, of his hopes and fears for the coming convention, and of his earnest wish that the Whig element of the southern counties might be well represented there. He was among political friends, there being several lawyers and editors who sympathized politically with him, and he did not attempt to conceal fears and misgivings entertained by him as to the outcome of the gathering. He was well assured that the radical element of the northern counties would be there in force, and feared the effect upon the conservative element of the central and southern parts of the State. It was for the latter he seemed most concerned.

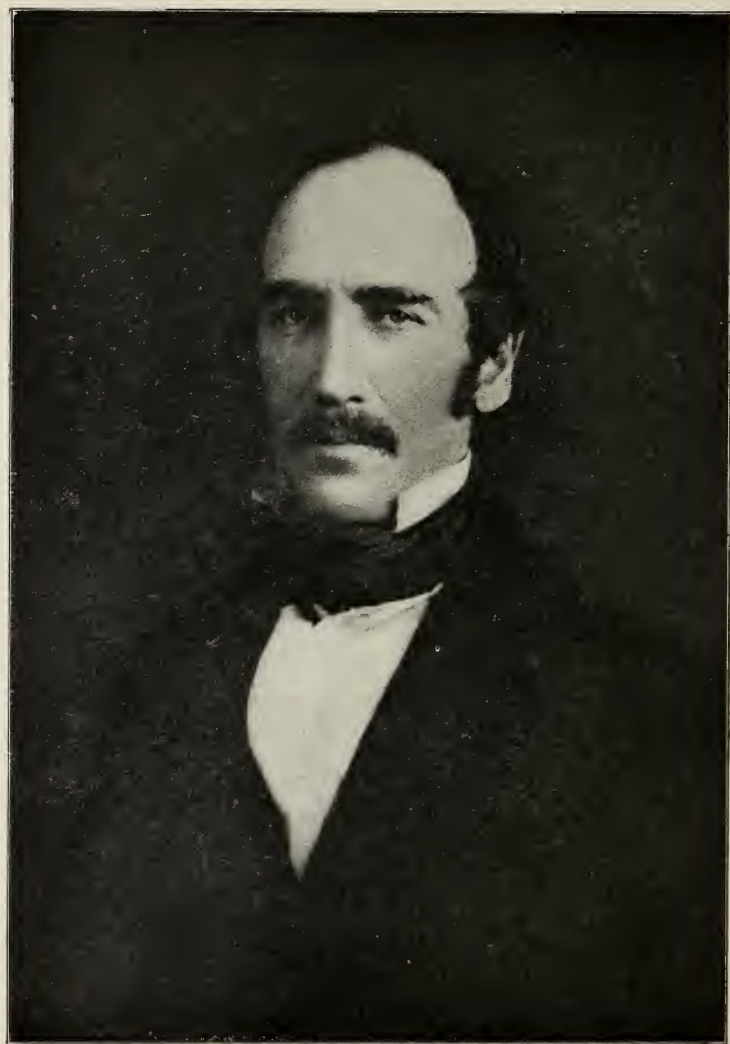
Mr. Lincoln seemed much inclined to indulge in reminiscences of his coming to Decatur twenty-five years before, as an immigrant from Indiana with his father's family, in an ox wagon, and could point out the exact locality in front of the public square where he halted the team driven by him which brought the Lincoln family and its belongings.

Early the next morning all took the northbound train for Bloomington. Mr. Lincoln had hardly entered the train until he began a search for the Whig element bound for the convention from the south, and was much gratified in finding one, Jesse K. DuBois, from Lawrence county.

Arriving in Bloomington, we found the Pike House, the principal hotel of the city, at the corner of Center and North streets, now (Monroe) full to overflowing and the streets alive with partisans of the



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WILLIAM H. BISSELL.

"Anti-Nebraska" type. Among them was the tall form of John Wentworth, earnestly engaging one after another in his attempts to make democrats, whigs and free-soilers forget old differences and join hands upon the uppermost issue, "Free Kansas." So too there was the athletic personality of Owen Lovejoy, making love to the abolition haters of the center and south. Archibald Williams and O. H. Browning, those conservative towers of ancient Whiggery, were there and alike surprised to find how much they now loved those fierce Democrats, John M. Palmer, Burton C. Cook, Norman B. Judd and Gustavus Koerner.

Governor Reeder, who in the face of hostile Missourians had abdicated the governorship of Kansas, to which he had been appointed by President Pierce, and in disguise fled the territory, had arrived in Bloomington the evening before and had addressed the assembled delegates at an open air meeting, telling them in detail and in a plain manner of the outrages perpetrated by the Missouri invaders upon the free state men of Kansas and upon himself, making it evident that the federal officers were parties thereto. Other speeches were made from the veranda of the Pike House on the preceding evening, the whole burden of which was the unholy conspiracy to fix upon Kansas the burden of a slave code, whether the people were willing or unwilling. Kansas and its wrongs was upon every lip and the very air was charged with the idea of resistance to what seemed to be the policy of the national administration towards free territory.

Delegates came to Bloomington highly excited by the news of the day and its verification by eye-witnesses of high character who had witnessed the outrages and suffered the wrongs, wrought them to a high state of excitement. The morning of the 29th came and with it the Chicago dailies giving the particulars of the destruction of the Free State Hotel and the newspaper press of Lawrence. Isaac N. Arnold, from a perch upon the main stairway of the Pike House, read with almost tragic emphasis, accounts and dispatches from the seat of war to the crowds in and about the hotel. All these things combined to inflame the sentiment of listening delegates and others in attendance upon the convention to the highest degree, even the old Whigs, proverbially conservative and forbearing, were moved to demonstrations.

In this mood early in the day the crowds moved to Major's Hall, the place set apart for the convention. The hall, not a large one, was promptly filled with an eager crowd of men who had evidently been much moved by the speeches and intercourse of the miscellaneous gathering about the Pike House, which, up to that time, had been the storm center of the town. The convention was called to order and Archibald Williams, of Quincy, the conservative Whig, called temporarily to the chair, a precaution well taken at this juncture. H. S. Baker, of Alton, was made temporary secretary.

No sooner had this temporary organization been effected than Leander Munsell, a delegate from Edgar county, an old Whig and a former member of the General Assembly, got recognition from the chair and gave vent to pent up enthusiasm by nominating Colonel Bissell for Governor. The lapse from conventionalities was little

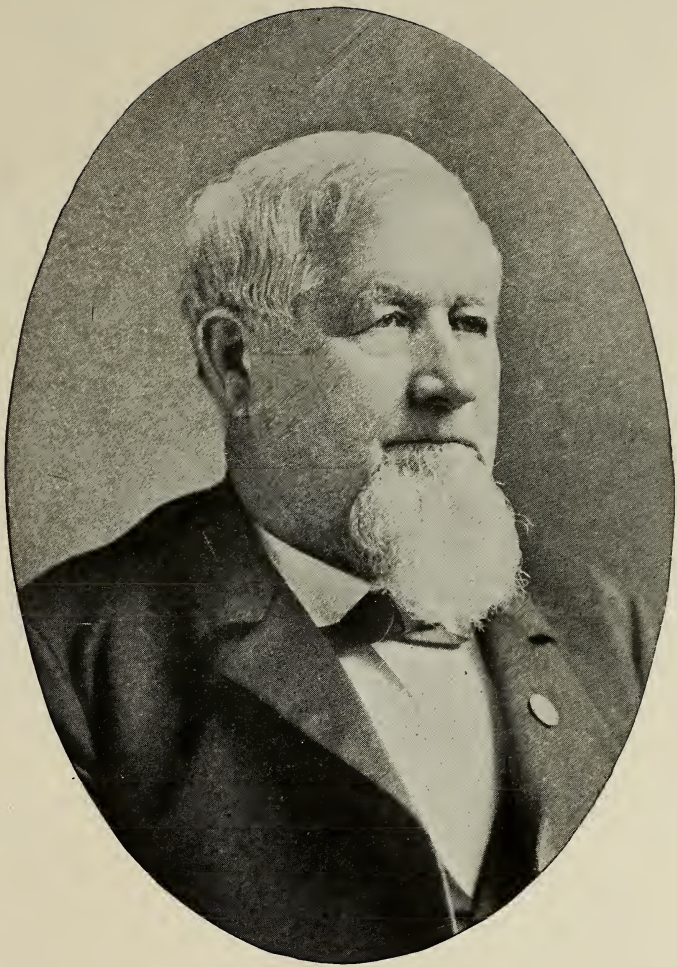
noticed, for the nomination met with a tornado of seconds from all parts of the hall. The convention, even in its unorganized condition, was ready for action upon the premature nomination and impatiently awaited the reading of a letter from the candidate addressed to George T. Brown, stating that the condition of his health was such as to preclude an active canvass by him, which letter had no other effect than to add to the desire for his nomination, which was then made by acclamation, amid a whirlwind of cheers and huzzas. This was followed as informally by a like nomination of Francis A. Hoffman, of Chicago, a German citizen of great popularity, for Lieutenant Governor. Both nominations were the spontaneous outgrowth of previous discussions among the newspapers and the people.

This part of the business settled in advance, the convention proceeded with its organization by the appointment of the usual committees, which in due time made their reports. The time elapsing between the appointment of the committees and the report of the committee on resolutions, beside the formal approval of reports and the permanent organization, was occupied in listening to speeches from the men of the convention. In the opinion of the writer no speeches ever delivered in the State had more attentive listeners.

The oratorical ball was fairly set in motion when John M. Palmer, upon his presentation by the committee on permanent organization was installed as president of the convention. A man of heroic figure, less than forty years of age, at the meridian of his physical strength, florid of complexion and with nervous energy enough to well equip a platoon of ordinary men, his presence and bearing were such as to inspire even a stranger with the conviction that the right man had been chosen to direct the forces of the convention. He had been a political and strong personal friend of Senator Douglas, who had freely criticised the late political departure of Illinois' favorite Senator, and all knew it. His address was brief, suited to the occasion, abounded in sharp thrusts for his late friend and the new theory of popular sovereignty, which was already bearing fruits in Kansas, yet statesmanlike. It directed the attention of the convention to the wrong perpetrated by the repeal of the Missouri compromise and to the remedy for the wrong in the hands of the voters of the land. The speaker was greeted with the most enthusiastic applause.

Palmer was followed by O. H. Browning, of Quincy, another conservative Whig, who sought by his speech to lay the ghost of Abolitionism which all feared. Mr. Browning's high character and his connection with the old Whig party made him a tower of strength with that element in the convention. His address was wise, deliberate and abounded in references to the utterances of Henry Clay, for whom he claimed a high position among the conservative opponents of the extension of slavery. He called upon his Whig friends to stand fast by the land-marks of their great leader, and evidently made a strong impression upon that element of the convention.

Then came Owen Lovejoy. Many had only known him by what his enemies had said of him, and only expected to see the veritable "Raw Head and Bloody-Bones" of the Abolition Ogre, who surely must be of kin to "Auld Cloutie." Lovejoy well knew the light in



GEN. JOHN M. PALMER.

Picture taken in 1896.

which he was looked upon by many of his hearers, and also knew that this was his opportunity to make friends, and never put in a better day's work with this end in view. He had mingled with the crowd there assembled enough to know that the spirit which moved the men was opposition to the spread of slavery into the free territories; so to this principle as connected with the work of Douglas, he gave especial attention. The horrors of the Kansas condition, existing so near by, was painted in apt prose and poetry, as the work of the demon slavery; there by the invitation of Senator Douglas. His speech, as a piece of word painting of the subject in hand, with illustrations from actual life as at that moment transpiring in that unhappy territory, was vivid and moving to the greatest extent. Those who knew Lovejoy need not be told that his ability to move men by his oratory, has not been excelled in the case of any man of his century. When any topic connected with African slavery as it existed in this country prior to 1865, formed the theme of his discourse, he became the blazing meteor upon the platform. His eloquence in argument and denunciation scorched and burned to the quick. It need not be said that on that 29th day of May, 1856, he carried his miscellaneous audience with him. He did more. He broke down much of the unreasonable prejudice against himself and secured for himself a hearing before an audience in Illinois without danger of insult, a treatment he could not, before then, expect.

Among the crowd in the hall was one James S. Emory, a refugee with Governor Reeder from Kansas, whose printing press had a few days before been dumped into the Kansas river and his home broken up by invaders from Missouri. Emory was called to the stand for a speech. He was no tyro at delineation, and spoke with the vehemence of a man who had been cruelly robbed of his rights as an American citizen upon American soil. He spoke as an eye-witness and lacking nothing as a word painter, with language severe and almost intemperate in his appeals for armed interference in Kansas affairs, he awakened much sympathy with some, and alarm at the effect of his words with others.

During Emory's speech the committee on resolutions made its appearance which was a signal for the termination of his remarks. It will be seen by a glance at the resolutions reported that they present a single issue, that of slavery extension in the territories. No question as to the rightfulness of the institution of slavery as an abstract proposition is presented or was raised, and upon this single issue, under the name of the "Anti-Nebraska Party," did the men there assemble, go before the country and wage their war against Senator Douglas; for his personality became a part of the issue.

The political promotors of today, with half a century of added wisdom culled when politics had become a fine art, with the situation of 1856 in this State before them, will fail if they try to apply a criticism to it. The report as it came from the committee, wisely organized so as to include representations of every shade of opinions and with full knowledge of the difficult task before the convention—the welding into a working party of the heretofore diverse elements and opinions—showed their work well done. Looking at the report at this distance

and considering the conditions, it must always be conceded to have been wisely done. The resolutions were unanimously adopted without discussion.

This clear cut platform adopted, there was a wild yell for Lincoln, who had probably until then been with the committee on platform and had taken but little part in the prior proceedings, though he had listened to the speech of Emory, the most extreme of all in his denunciations of the administration at Washington. Mr. Lincoln appeared before the convention as the last speaker, was received with demonstration of applause and perhaps with expectations on the part of some that he would fan the flame of acrimony and discontent aroused by the remarks of some of the preceding speakers, but if any so supposed they were disappointed, for he did no such thing.

Seeming to know that there had been wild talk about people going to Kansas armed with Sharpe's rifles, with which to settle the contentions there in issue, he began most gently with a rebuke for such appeals to violence. In words he deprecated the use of force as a means of settling the issue, and concluded this part of his speech with these words as nearly as I remember them: "*No, my friends, I'll tell you what we will do, we will wait until November, and then we will shoot paper ballots at them,*" referring, of course, to the coming presidential election and to the ballots to be then cast.

From this pleasant disposition of the war talk, he then turned his remarks to a logical discussion of the legislation set on foot by Judge Douglas and illustrated its un wisdom by citing the then condition of Kansas, as a necessary result of the competition, invited by the law between freedom and slavery. He insisted that the Free State people of Kansas were right in their attempts to exclude slavery from their territory, and earnestly appealed to his audience to support them by supporting the "Anti-Nebraska" ticket there nominated. By frequent citations from the speeches of Henry Clay, with his views of the rightfulness of exclusive legislation for slavery, he showed himself in line with the first Whig precedents and claimed the Whig vote of the State for the new party and its platform.

Mr. Lincoln devoted much of his discourse to the threats and insinuation of a dissolution of the Union of the States, made by southern men and published broadcast in the North. He argued and reasoned as if the South in person then stood before him and was listening to him, a form of speech which he adopted with great effect in the latter part of his first inaugural address from the capitol steps at Washington. To this supposititious audience he argued the un wisdom of disunion and the direful consequences to the country of an attempt of any party at dissolution. He assured his audience that northern men had no desire for a separation and would never consent to it. Warming up with his topic and still using the pronoun of the second person, he closed this part of his speech with these remarkable words: "WE WON'T GO OUT OF THE UNION, AND YOU SHA'NT!" This was said with great deliberation, when he had raised his figure to its greatest height, his eyes, usually so mild and playful, now flashing wild determination, and with vehement gestures with his head and arms. The effect upon his audience was shown by the

applause with which it was greeted, amid which the orator withdrew from the stand, and the work of the convention was over. There were then no Whigs, Democrats, nor Free-Soilers, but men of every shade had been fused into a conquering phalanx.

Until this convention Mr. Lincoln was little known in many parts of the State, as his law practice and political speeches had been confined to the central counties, mostly. He went away better known throughout the State and with a reputation as a public speaker never before enjoyed.

No stenographic report or otherwise was made of this speech or of any other delivered before the convention, so far as known, but the manner and matter of this speech were extravagantly praised by the daily press of the State. The fact of no report is to be regretted, as all who heard it and other speeches of the same man agree that it was among the greatest. It has since been called the "Lost Speech," but though lost to posterity, it was far from being lost upon his then hearers.

Other candidates for State officers were nominated upon the recommendation of a committee appointed to name suitable persons; and as is well known the ticket thus named, with the exception of the candidate for Lieutenant Governor who gave place to another, was elected at the November election, 1856, the first instance in the history of the State where candidates for State offices adverse to the party of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson were successful; while the electoral vote of the State was given to the Democratic nominee. Had the entire Whig element of the State stood by Lincoln's choice, as it did by Bissell, Buchanan would have lost the State.

The ultimate effect was to wholly change the political complexion of the State for the next half century, with the exception of one gubernatorial term. Another effect was to remove from a probably successful presidential candidacy, Judge Douglas, and to make Lincoln the man of destiny, for he retired from that convention the acknowledged leader of the new party in Illinois, and before two weeks came near being made the candidate of his party for Vice-President, in that campaign.

It was said at the beginning of this paper that no meeting of the people of the State of Illinois in state convention was ever held which effected greater results in the State and national history than did this convention. Half a century of history making proves this claim to be true.

Another assertion there made as to those named as participants in its deliberations and as to its effects upon them, is also true. Coming from the doors of Major's Hall at the close of that convention was Abraham Lincoln, a future President of the United States, the Emancipator of a race, whose memory the wide world reveres; there came also Richard Yates, the great War Governor of Illinois, who was eminent as a United States Senator; another Governor of Illinois, no less distinguished as a Senator and as a Major General in the War of the Rebellion. John M. Palmer, was of the number; there came a future Cabinet Minister and United States Senator,

Orville H. Browning; there were also William Pitt Kellogg, Burton C. Cook, Thomas J. Henderson, Abner C. Harding, John Wentworth, Thomas J. Turner, Owen Lovejoy, and perhaps others who served terms in Congress of various periods; there was also Norman B. Judd, who became a foreign minister; there were well known citizens who afterwards became members of the General Assembly, among whom may be named A. W. Mack, J. V. Eustace, Isaac C. Pugh, Dr. Robert Boal, Nathaniel Niles, Isaac L. Morrison, John H. Bryant, H. C. Johns, and Washington Bushnell who also filled the office of Attorney General of this State; there were those who before and after this date distinguished themselves as leaders of public opinion in the capacity of editors of newspapers, among whom may be named D. S. Parker, of Kankakee, Geo. T. Brown, of Alton, George Schneider, of Chicago, B. F. Shaw, of Dixon, W. H. Bailhache, of Springfield, C. H. Ray, Joseph Medill and J. L. Scripps, of Chicago. It is but just to say that Mr. Selby was prevented from being at the convention on account of having suffered from an assault made upon him by a ruffianly opponent.

Other distinguished citizens of great prominence before or since the convention were in attendance, among whom may and should be named, such men as Leonard Sweet, Jesse W. Fell and W. W. Orme, of Bloomington, D. L. Phillips, of Union county, G. D. A. Parks, of Joliet, Gen. James M. Ruggles, of Mason county, M. P. Sweet, T. J. Prickett, A. C. Fuller, A. J. Joslyn, W. H. Herndon and William Vocke. Among those in attendance were those eminent historians, John Moses and John G. Nicolay. So this convention gave to many young men in attendance impulses which staid with them through life and gave them position and character.

So there were many who, with some of those named above, five years afterward, when the South undertook to test Lincoln's declaration to the effect that this nation could not exist half slave and half free, took their places in the ranks of the Nation's defenders, and either came home with their chaplets of victory, or gave up their lives to verify Lincoln's other declaration to the effect that the South should not go out of the Union.

While the convention was a notable one for the reasons given upon the preceding page, it was also notable on account of the absence of some. At many places in the State were individuals whose convictions were as strong as were those of Lincoln or of any other participant in the convention, as to the policy of prohibiting slavery in the territories, and who were unstinted in their opposition to the course of Senator Douglas, yet who, from a timid fear of being thought and called "Abolitionists," remained away from the convention, trained with the third party in the campaign of 1856, and left Mr. Lincoln and his friends to bear the burden of an active opposition to the policy of the national administration. These men, who shall be nameless here, were what are sometimes called moral cowards; but when the day of victory was seen to be sure for the new party, they took their places in the front ranks and have well maintained their claims to this day, the chief reapers in the harvest where others sowed the seed.